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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000503

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SUBJECT: PM ADVISOR RIKABI ON DEVELOPING THE BILATERAL
U.S.-IRAQ RELATIONSHIP

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Robert Ford for reasons 1
.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Sadiq al-Rikabi, a close political advisor to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, told Emboffs in February that the Maliki government seeks a special, long-term alliance with the U.S. and asked for the U.S. to remain engaged in helping Iraqis solve internal political disputes. Iraq offers the U.S. an economic partnership and a regional ally that will help stand up to Iran, Rikabi said. Rikabi will travel to Washington March 2-7, and seeks meetings at the White House, State, Treasury and Defense. End Summary.

Maliki Government Seeks Continued U.S. Partnership

¶2. (C) Prime Minister Advisor Sadiq al-Rikabi told Emboffs during multiple meetings in February that the Maliki Government wants its relationship with the United States to move from a "burden" to a "partnership" that transcends administrations and is more reflective of normal state-to-state engagement. Rikabi said that by voting for the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), Iraq put the world on notice that it seeks a "special" alliance with the United States, and a long-term relationship across different fields (education, security, commerce). The U.S. should now see Iraq as an opportunity, an ally and a partner, especially given ongoing troubles in other parts of the Middle East, he said.

¶3. (C) Rikabi understood the U.S. desire to withdrawal combat troops from Iraq while providing Iraqi Security Forces assistance and maintaining a counter-terrorism capability. Rikabi was interested to know whether a U.S. drawdown could adjust to potential crises, such as threats from Al-Qaeda in Iraq. He also asked whether the implementation of a drawdown would respond to input from the Iraqi government.

2009: Weaving the Fabric of a Relationship

¶4. (C) Rikabi asked for the USG to help bring Iraqi leaders together to manage internal disputes without dictating solutions. He said the Iraqi Government understands the great sacrifice in terms of lives and money the U.S. has devoted to Iraq. Given that, we must "protect success in Iraq," he said. In return, Iraq in the long-term offers the U.S. a strategic partner that will not use its oil wealth against the United States, and that can for the first time be a pillar of stability and openness in the Middle East. Rikabi expressed Iraq's desire to purchase U.S. weaponry and equipment, including M1 Abrams tanks and eventually F-16s, explaining that this is the essence of a "relationship," requiring long-term training, and technical assistance, and

spare parts. Together with educational exchanges, and commercial ties, these are the types of things he said Iraqis are looking for to signal that a relationship with the United States can endure beyond any one administration (including the Maliki administration). He said 2009 should begin this process in earnest, using the SFA as a roadmap.

U.S. Helps Iraq Grow Stronger and Stand Up to Iran

¶ 15. (C) Rikabi explained that many Iraqis continue to question America's commitment to a relationship with Iraq, which he said others, including Iran, seek to exploit. On Iran, Qsaid others, including Iran, seek to exploit. On Iran, Rikabi pleaded (as he always does) for Americans to stop seeing Iraqi Shi'a as somehow beholden to Tehran. He pointed to Maliki's crackdown on Shi'a extremists, many backed by Iran, and success in standing up to Iran on the Security and Strategic Framework Agreements, as examples of Iraq coming into its own as a strong and sovereign state. "Iran has lost" in its battle to dominate Iraq in the political and security fields, he said. He said Iraq seeks peaceful and constructive relations with Iran but it will never accept Iran's efforts to destabilize Iraq by backing illegal groups.

A strong relationship with the U.S. helps Iraq in the region -- just as the U.S. relationship has helped Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. He expressed hope that Iraq can have an even stronger bond given our common sacrifice here. He offered, finally, to assist the U.S. in any aspect of its policy towards Iran and asked for Iraq to be treated as a partner in the region, including consultation with Iraq as the U.S. develops new strategies for regional engagement. He

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indicated some discomfort that a U.S.-Iranian dialogue would place the "Iraq file" on the table, and stressed including Iraq in any such conversation.

¶ 16. (C) On other diplomatic initiatives, he said the Turkish trilateral process is going very well and should not be changed. He characterized multilateral fora such as the Expanded Neighbors Process and the GCC 3 as all talk but no action or follow up. What made Arab states come to Iraq was not a multilateral meeting, but demonstrated strength in Baghdad and standing up to Shi'a extremists in Basra. He said the trilateral talks with Iran did not succeed because both Iran and the U.S. were not prepared to engage seriously on the issues. He thought the environment might be better now -- particularly with Iran in a weaker position inside Iraq and a new administration in Washington -- but Washington should not expect rapid changes from Tehran, regardless of Iran's upcoming election results. The best policy is a partnership with Iraq that demonstrates strength and encourages Iran to engage Iraq peacefully.

Hopes to Avoid Referendum on the Security Agreement

¶ 17. (C) Rikabi said that Prime Minister Maliki hopes to show the Iraqi people over the next six months tangible improvements under the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement (SA) to head-off calls to hold a referendum on the agreement. (Note: The SA passed parliament with a requirement to hold a national referendum on the agreement before July 30, 2009. Maliki's Sunni detractors insisted on a referendum. End Note.) Rikabi said Maliki wishes to avoid a referendum. Asked for examples of tangible improvements, Rikabi said removing the vestiges of Chapter 7 obligations in the U.N. Security Council, educational exchange programs, commercial and business ties, and continued reductions in U.S. forces, will all help those making the case against the referendum.

Fertile Ground for Investment, Capacity-Building

¶ 8. (C) One example for how to build the U.S.-Iraq relationship would be expanded economic partnerships -- both government-led development and private sector investment, Rikabi said. Iraq has been starved of investment for decades, making it a fertile ground for growth. Rikabi asked the USG to encourage American companies to do business with Iraq, noting as an example President Sarkozy's recent visit to Baghdad in which he emphasized the need for French companies to invest in Iraq, recognizing the opportunity for mutual benefit and gain. Emboffs told Rikabi that Iraq needs to make the case for U.S. private companies to come to Iraq and do business. Rikabi said again that France, Germany, the UAE, and others are all actively pushing businesses to come to Iraq given the opportunities, but he wants U.S. companies to take a more leading role.

Local Governance and Capacity Building

¶ 9. (C) Following Da'wa's success in the recent provincial elections, Rikabi said Da'wa would play a role in choosing new provincial council governors but that the party would nominate experts, not merely party loyalists. He said there remains a need for local government capacity-building and highlighted U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams as important civilian-led ways to create strong state-to-state linkages and help Iraq develop. Rikabi also said the Maliki government seeks educational exchanges to build Iraq's human capital.

Coming to Washington

¶ 10. (C) Rikabi said he will travel to Washington March 2-7 and would like to meet with top officials at the White House, State, Treasury, and Defense. As one of Prime Minister Maliki's closest advisors, we recommended appropriate high-level access. The visit is an opportunity to hear from the Prime Minister, through one of his closest advisors, how he views the developing relationship with Iraq -- as well as for us to convey any messages to the Prime Minister.
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